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THE STRATEGY ON THE WESTERN FRONT.—V

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BEFORE proceeding to a further analysis of the strategy of the operations on the Western Front, a brief reference to the numbers of the opposing armies will not be out of place.

On March 21, 1918, the fighting strength of the Germans probably outnumbered that of the Allies by about three hundred thousand men; but as the weeks and months went by and more and more American troops were made ready and brought into the firing line, this inequality between them was overcome; and by July 18, 1918, when Foch began his great counter-offensive, the fighting strength of the Allies on the Western Front probably exceeded that of the Germans as much as that of the Germans had exceeded that of the Allies on March 21.

But it should be constantly borne in mind that a preponderance of fighting forces on either side was not necessary to the carrying out of Napoleon's principle of bringing superior forces against the enemy at the point of attack; for by surprise, or by swifter concentration, or by greater skill in maneuvering, an expert commander will not infrequently be able to accomplish this, regardless of whether his own or his adversary's forces are numerically superior within the theater of operations.

Right here, perhaps, is a good place for pointing out the fact that during more than four years of fierce and bloody fighting on the Western Front, the constant purpose of the commanding generals on both sides, whether they aimed a blow at some weak point of the enemy's line, or struck fiercely at the bases of his salients, or attempted to break through his line on a wide front and resume a war of movement, was to bring outnumbering and greatly su-

perior forces upon their chosen objectives, the immediate battlefields.

After a week's bitter fighting the onrush of the Germans in their great thrust towards Amiens, which began on March 21, 1918, was finally checked by the French reserves who were hurried to that front mainly from Champagne; and the first day after General Foch assumed supreme command of the Allied armies, he announced that Amiens was safe.¹

Then, after a pause of eleven days, the Germans, on April 9, 1918, began their great thrust south of Ypres; and it was continued with hard fighting and varying success until their final effort on April 29, which, resulting in extremely heavy losses, caused them to abandon their attempts to break through the British line on that front. As at Amiens, so at Ypres, it was the arrival of the French reserves that turned the scale in favor of the British and enabled them to stop the Germans.

From April 29 to May 27, the Germans again paused in their efforts, in order to prepare for their third great thrust. The question was where would they strike? Would it be on the west side of the angular front somewhere between Montdidier and Ypres? or on the south side somewhere between Noyon and Verdun? There were several reasons why they would choose, and did choose, to strike on the south side:

First: The French reserves were along the west side, some as far north as Ypres, but mainly concentrated about Amiens, covering the point of junction of the British and French armies; and were being held there.

Second: The fact that the reserves were being held on the west side indicated that the French and British commanders expected the next attack on that side and were prepared for it.

Third: By making their break through on the south side and extending it between Paris and Nancy and beyond, they would not only separate the French right wing occupying Verdun and the line of the Vosges from the French left wing in front and northeast of Paris, but would sever the communications of the French right wing and be in an advantageous position to force its capture or destruction. Moreover, such a thrust as this would threaten

¹ Frank H. Simonds in *Review of Reviews*, June, 1918, p. 593.

the communications of the American forces between their camps south of the St. Mihiel salient and their ports of debarkation on the west and south coasts of France; and make it very difficult for them to fall back without abandoning a good part of the great collection of munitions and supplies which they had accumulated in that vicinity.

Thus we see that while a break through on either front would have given the Germans the opportunity to carry out that principle of strategy of defeating separately the divided forces of the enemy, by holding one with a containing force while they massed superior numbers against the other and crushed or captured it, and then concentrated their whole strength on the remaining force, it was only on the south front that the Germans could also at the same time carry out that other great principle of strategy of striking at the communications of the enemy without exposing their own to his attack.

Accordingly, on May 27, 1918, the Germans began their third great thrust against the Allied line on a front of about thirty miles, from the point where it crossed the Aisne, some ten or twelve miles north of Reims, to the point where it crossed the Soissons-Laon Railway, about seven miles northeast of Soissons.

The attack on this front was a great surprise to the Allies; and for awhile was remarkably successful. The French were literally swept from the Chemin-des-Dames, forced over the Aisne, and thence across the Vesle. Four French divisions were practically annihilated; and the British troops north of Reims, having their flank uncovered, were forced back towards that city. This practically left the way open to a further advance; and the Germans, taking immediate advantage of it, rushed forward almost unopposed. It was a serious time for General Foch; for he had only the wreck of the four French divisions and such local reserves as he could collect to stay the German advance.

The onrush continued for about a week. The Germans took Soissons, got possession of the Soissons-Chateau Thierry Railway, pushed south to Chateau Thierry and the north bank of the Marne, and even succeeded in cutting the Paris-Chateau Thierry-Chalons-Verdun Railway,

one of the important lines of communication of the French right wing with Paris.

But at Chateau Thierry and along the Marne they were finally checked by the French and American reserves that were rushed to the threatened front from other sections of the Allied line. Here at the bridge which crosses the Marne opposite Chateau Thierry, at Boursches, and in Belleau Wood, and at Vaux, the Third and Second American Divisions, by their superb fighting, helped to bring the extreme German advance to a standstill and gained for themselves an imperishable fame. Already the First American Division had distinguished itself by capturing Cantigny, near Montdidier, on May 28, the day following the beginning of this great thrust.

On the whole, this thrust was a success for the Germans. They had pushed back the Allied line a distance of thirty miles at its farthest point. But it was not the complete success that they had hoped for, since it was stopped before they broke completely through the line and resumed a war of movement. And what was of the utmost importance to the Allies was that the Germans did not succeed in pushing back the Allied line more than four or five miles westward of Soissons; or succeed in taking Reims or even the high ground about that city. As a consequence, they were left in possession of the long, narrow, dangerous Chateau Thierry salient. But it was not alone this salient that gave them concern. The Amiens salient was also long, narrow, and dangerous. Both were extremely vulnerable. Both offered the Allies a splendid opportunity for striking the Germans a telling blow.

In this precarious and dangerous situation the Germans saw that they must attempt to widen the bases of these two narrow salients and render them less vulnerable and dangerous before making any further attempt to break through on the south side. This could best be done by an attack in force from the Noyon-Montdidier section on the west side of the Oise River towards Compiègne; for, should this objective be reached, it would force the French to withdraw from the high ground and woods in the narrow salient, Compiègne-Noyon-Soissons, in the angle between the Oise and Aisne Rivers, and practically obliterate the Amiens and Chateau Thierry salients. Or, to speak more accurately, such an attack, if successful, would entirely oblit-

erate the Amiens salient and change the narrow Chateau Thierry salient into a much larger, broader, and less vulnerable one, whose general outline would run from Montdidier through Compiègne to Chateau Thierry on one side, and from Chateau Thierry to Reims on the other.

On June 9, 1918, just two weeks from the day the Germans began their thrust on Chateau Thierry, they struck with great force on the Noyon-Montdidier front. But the Allies were not surprised as they had been on May 27. Expecting the attack, they had reserves near at hand to meet it. Nevertheless, by desperate fighting and through the sacrifice of many men, the Germans met with some success. They drove the French from the environs of Noyon some five or six miles down the valley on the west side of the Oise; and this advance, by threatening the communications of the French on the east side of the river, made it necessary for them also to retire down the stream. But despite their most strenuous efforts the Germans failed to reach their objective. On June 13 they were still making slight advances here and there in the face of enormous losses; but by June 15 the fourth great German thrust had been practically brought to a halt, with the German advance lines still some six miles from Compiègne.

The total outcome of these seven days' fierce fighting was that the Germans had advanced their lines five or six miles between the two salients and had gained some valuable ground, but had fallen far short of reaching their objective; nevertheless, the advance in this portion of their front was of great importance to them, since it considerably widened the bases and diminished the vulnerability of the Amiens and Chateau Thierry salients.

Then there followed a pause of a month, in which the Germans prepared for their fifth great thrust, and the Allies were content to remain on the defensive, since every day's delay was adding, on an average, from seven to eight thousand men to the strength of the American Army in France.

There was no change in the general strategical situation. To break through the south front, push through between Paris and Nancy and sever the communications of the French right wing occupying the line of the Vosges, was still strategically the best plan, as it had been from the first. And since the German advance on Chateau

Thierry had created a French salient—although a broad one—with Reims as its apex, this was an additional reason for striking on this front; for it was evident to all that should the Germans break through between Reims and the Argonne Forest on one side of this salient, and between Reims and Chateau Thierry on the other side, they would cut or threaten the communications of the troops occupying it and force their capture or retirement. Moreover, such an attack would at the same time greatly widen the Chateau Thierry salient and make it much less vulnerable to an Allied attack.

Then again, with the French holding Reims, Foch could launch a counter attack from that city northward and westward and cut the roads and railways so vital to the existence of the German troops occupying the Chateau Thierry salient. A thrust northward to the Aisne would cut the Soissons-Neufchatel-Rethel-Mezieres Railway; a thrust westward to Fismes would cut the Chateau Thierry-Fismes Railway.

These reasons, evidently, were patent to the Allies; for they were expecting the Germans to make the thrust along these very lines; and, consequently, it did not take them by surprise as did the great thrust of May 27 on Chateau Thierry. Of equal importance, also, was the fact that the month's delay had given Foch time to prepare to meet the attack.

On July 15, 1918, the Germans launched their fifth and last great thrust against the Allied line on a front of about seventy-five miles, extending from the western edge of the Argonne Forest on their left, past Reims, to Chateau Thierry on their right; and as the action developed the front was extended northward from Chateau Thierry some twenty-five miles to Soissons.

From the start the Germans made but little headway between the Argonne Forest and Reims. General Gouraud who commanded this portion of the French line had ascertained only a few days previously just when the Germans would begin their attack, and he made his dispositions so skilfully to meet it that a good part of the German army in his front was practically annihilated. In repulsing the attack he was ably assisted by the Forty-second American Division which fought with great valor near Perthes.

Still, near the Reims salient on its east side, the Germans made a little advance. Here they captured Monronvilliers Heights; and, in the earlier rushes, even succeeded in reaching Prunay and in cutting the Reims-Chalons Railway at this point; but the French, realizing the importance of holding this line of railway, strongly counter attacked and retook the town. However, the Germans in this vicinity held most of their gains, their line having been advanced some three or four miles southwestward in the direction of Epernay; and this was of the utmost importance to them, since it was a thrust into the very base of the Reims salient.

Between Chateau Thierry and Reims the Germans made a better beginning. On the whole Marne front, they forced the crossing of the river, driving back the French, and a considerable American contingent of the Third Division which was on outpost duty a few miles east of Chateau Thierry. But the Americans by a brilliant series of counter attacks at Mezy and at the mouth of the Surmelin drove back the enemy and finally succeeded in re-establishing their line in their immediate front.¹

But the Germans, despite these reverses and in the face of spirited French attacks, held their position on the south side of the Marne for five or six miles on either side of Dormans and began slowly to push forward up the valley of the Marne on a front of about twelve miles; and, by the evening of July 17, their advance was within eight miles of Epernay and extended northward to the western edge of the Mountain of Reims, just north of Epernay.

The situation had reached a critical period. Although the Germans had been successfully checked throughout a good portion of their long battle front, they had, by massing superior forces and making stupendous efforts on each side of the base of the Reims salient, met with considerable success. And it is evident that if they could have pushed forward a few miles farther up the Marne Valley, captured Epernay, and seized the Mountain of Reims, they would have gained possession of a considerable part of the Epernay-Reims Railway, which would have forced the Allies to withdraw immediately from the Reims sal-

¹ "It was on this occasion," says General Pershing in his report to the Secretary of War, "that a single regiment of the Third wrote one of the most brilliant pages in our military annals."

ient over the Reims-Chalons Railway; and this would have been attended with great difficulties, since the German line was very close to the railway in the vicinity of Prunay.

Then, a further advance of the Germans southward from the Argonne Forest-Reims front, and southeastward from the Epernay-Reims front up the Marne Valley to and beyond Chalons, would have severed or threatened the communications of the Allied troops occupying the Argonne Forest and the great Verdun salient and forced them either to surrender or retire. These operations, it is readily seen, would have wiped out the vulnerable German salients of Chateau Thierry and St. Mihiel and left the Germans in a most favorable position for taking in reverse the Allied troops occupying the line of the Vosges. Thus, Germany's original intention of turning the Vosges and the French fortresses along that front would have been accomplished; not by the south, but by the north; not by passing through the Belfort gap, but by ironing out the Reims and Verdun salients.

Here, then, was the turning point of this great battle; for one more successful push up the valley of the Marne to Epernay would have changed the whole conduct of the campaign and most probably have produced astounding results.

Strategically and psychologically the time had arrived for Foch to strike.

First: Because there was every indication, every probability, that there would be left no vulnerable German salients to attack, should he delay a few days longer.

Second: Because the Germans in their fifth great thrust, although partially successful, had met with great discouragement and terrible losses. It was evident that they could no longer expect, even with a month's preparation, to break through the Allied line on an extended front and advance some thirty or thirty-five miles into the enemy's territory as they had done on March 21 and on May 27. And to win the war required them to do even more than this; for unless they could eventually break through the Allied line and resume a war of movement, there was no hope of final success.

Third: Because the French had been greatly encouraged by the fact that along the entire fighting line they had

been able, with the assistance of the Americans, to hold the Germans in their original positions, or to check them in the few places where they had bent in the Allied line. After months of falling back, after years of defensive fighting, to be able to check the onrush of the Germans in one of their great thrusts, and to take the offensive here and there and force them back, force *them* to retire, brought encouragement to every French heart and raised the spirits of the entire French army.

Fourth: Because the American troops, wherever employed in the fighting, had demonstrated their fitness and bravery. At Cantigny, at Chateau Thierry, at Boursches, in Belleau Wood, at Vaux, at Perthes, at Mezy and the mouth of the Surmelin, they had fought with extraordinary dash, determination, and courage. They were no longer untried troops. Foch knew from the way they had fought that they could be depended upon, that he could put them into the front line beside the veteran and indomitable French troops, and that they would not fail him. Young, enthusiastic, energetic, brave, and with their very souls yearning for the fray, there was no task too difficult for them, no veteran German troops whom they feared to face.

Just how General Foch, at this very crisis of the war, took advantage of the situation to strike the blow which stopped completely the onrush of the Germans and soon turned the tide of battle against them along their whole far-flung battleline will be described in our next article.

But before closing the discussion it will be instructive and interesting to inquire, what would most probably have been the outcome, had the Germans, as herein suppositiously described, been able to push south between Paris and Nancy and take the French and Americans in reverse along the line of the Vosges? There are two contingencies that might have arisen.

First: The Germans might have pushed far enough south to sever not only the communications of the French with Paris, but also the communications of the Americans with their ports of debarkation at St. Nazaire, La Rochelle, and Bordeaux on the west coast of France and at Marseilles on the south coast; in which case neither the French right wing nor the American army could have escaped capture; for with their supplies cut off, and a Ger-

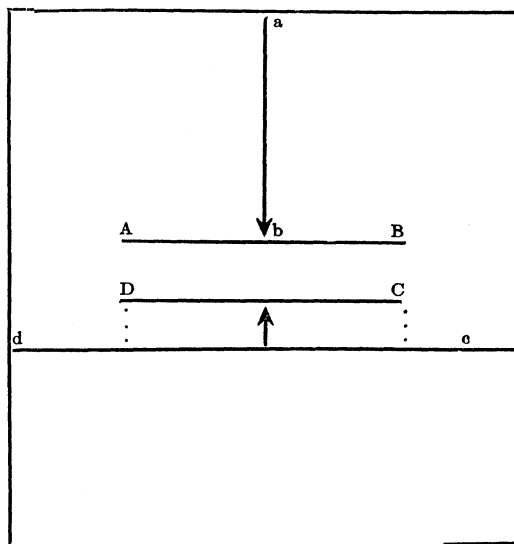
man army closing in on their rear, while another was pressing them closely on their original front, there would have been no alternative but to surrender.

Had these events taken place, substantially as here outlined,—and it requires no stretch of the imagination to see that they could easily have happened—they might have led to the speedy ending of the war in Germany's favor; for with the greater part of the American army and a considerable part of the French army out of the fighting, the German armies in eastern France, with new communications established directly across the Vosges into South Germany, could have safely pushed forward and enveloped Paris and the French army defending it.

Second: The French and Americans along the Vosges from Verdun to Belfort might have seen sufficiently early the danger of losing their communications and have attempted a retirement to avoid the disaster which would have inevitably resulted from their loss. But with the Germans pushing south from Epernay and Chalons upon Troyes and Chaumont, this retirement along the roads and railways to Paris and the American ports of debarkation on the west coast of France would have been directly across the front of the German advance, which would have exposed them to a flank attack and compelled them to form front to a flank,¹ one of the most dangerous positions for

¹An army forms front to a flank when it operates on a front parallel to the line communicating with its base.

To illustrate the danger of fighting a battle in this position: Suppose an army AB is marching south perpendicular to its communications ab, and the opposing army, which is marching west along its communications c.d., is forced to form front to a flank, CD, and engage AB in battle. Now it is evident that a single defeat of CD by AB would drive CD from its communications and disaster would follow; whereas, if AB is defeated by CD, AB can fall back and fight again and again, without any chance of losing its communications.



an army when it fights a battle. "Nothing," says Napoleon, "is so rash or contrary to principle as to make a flank march before an army in position."¹

But let us take the most favorable view of the case for the Allies, and suppose that the retirement of their right wing could have been made past the front of the German army without any great loss or disaster, what would have been the outcome? Evidently the French and Americans of the Allied right wing could then have formed battle line, extending, say, approximately southward from Chateau Thierry to the Seine and thence along the upper stretches of that river toward Dijon, which would have covered directly their communications with Paris and the ports of American debarkation on the western coast of France, and which would have put a stop to any German envelopment of the Allied right wing and enabled the French and Americans to make a prolonged resistance; for, unless some unforeseen or unusual disaster had overtaken them, they could hardly have been conquered without first being driven entirely across North Central France to the ports of American debarkation.

But before leaving this phase of the discussion, there is another point worthy of attention. It will be remembered that one of the ports of debarkation for American troops was Marseilles, and that the line of railway running thence to the American Headquarters at Chaumont was an almost due north and south line; so that, had the German advance been such as to prevent the French and Americans from falling back towards Paris and the western coast of France, they might have retired towards Marseilles.

The establishment of Marseilles for a point of debarkation and an American base of operations may be looked upon, strategically, as a measure of safety taken against the worst that might have happened; since it is evident that, had Paris been taken and a large part of the French and English armies been cut off and captured, the American army, reinforced by a good part of the right wing of the French army, might have been able to fall back slowly along the railways towards its base of operations at Marseilles and, by fighting defensive and delaying battles,

¹ Napoleon's *Maxims of War*, p. 66.

have become a rallying point for all Allied troops that were able to escape capture or to free themselves from the clutch of the German armies in Northern France. And, perhaps, by this means, the Allies might have been able eventually to turn the tide of battle; for the uncertainty of war is proverbial, and so long as an army can maintain its communications and obtain food, ammunition, and equipments there is hope.

It is not the purpose here to carry this discussion further, however interesting it might be to point out some of the strategical problems that would have arisen had it been necessary for the Allies to take this course, but simply to say that the selection of Marseilles for a point of debarkation and an American base of operations was a wise choice; because no one could foresee what turn the campaign might take; and because it is always wise to consider all contingencies and provide for the worst. "In forming the plan of a campaign," says Napoleon, "it is requisite to foresee everything the enemy may do, and to be prepared with the necessary means to counteract it."¹ Again he says: "Reserve to yourself every possible chance of success."²

¹ *Napoleon's Maxims of War*, p. 6.

² *Napoleon's Maxims of War*, p. 68.

(To be continued)